

# CLASSICAL AESTHETIC TRADITIONS OF INDIA, CHINA, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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In India, China, and the Arab Middle East, pre-modern philosophers and writers on music generated substantial sets of treatises – primarily in Sanskrit, Mandarin, and Arabic, respectively – dealing with what could broadly be termed the philosophy of music. Despite marked differences in approach and content, within each culture writers established intellectual traditions animated by a sense of historicity, a combination of mystical and empirical approaches, and earnest attempts to hypothesize the relation of music to society and the cosmos in an era pre-dating modern science.

## India

Indian music aesthetics, if broadly conceived as explicitly articulated “thinking about music,” constitutes a vast semantic field, including but not limited to a substantial corpus of Sanskrit treatises. As in most discussions of the topic, primary emphasis here will be on art music, although it should be remembered that the popularity of the classical fine arts has always been limited to the relatively elite minority; similarly, customary casual generalizations about, for example, “the Indian way of thinking” do not do justice to the prodigious social diversity of South Asia, whether in the present or in prior millennia.



If music aesthetics is understood in the most expansive sense as comprising conceptions about music's relation to epistemologies or conceptions of reality, then a voluminous body of classical Sanskrit philosophical and music theory must be considered in a thorough apprehension of Indian music ideology. The relevant body of literature consists primarily of a set of Sanskrit texts (or *shâstras*) dating roughly from the latter part of the first millennium BCE to the sixteenth century CE. The literature is diverse in several ways: texts focus variously on religion, philosophy, music theory, poetry, or phonetics; they are penned by scholars separated by centuries, thousands of miles, and in some cases contrasting schools of thought. At the same time, they are linked by a common language (Sanskrit) and literary style, by familiarity with and references to a revered body of texts, and – differences notwithstanding – by a shared philosophical basis and sense of historicity. Some of the landmarks in this literary tradition are: the *Nâtyâshâstra* (henceforth “NS,” second century BCE to second century CE?), on dramaturgy and its music; the *Nâradeshikshâ* (c.500 CE), a phonetic manual regarding Vedic chant and music mythology; the *Brhaddeshi* (“BD,” c.800), on music; the *Abhinâvabharati* (“AB,” c.1000), a recension of and commentary on the *Nâtyashâstra*; and the *Sangîtratnâkara* (“SR,” 1240) on music theory. Despite being handwritten on perishable palm leaves, texts such as the NS and SR were fairly widely disseminated among Hindu literati throughout the subcontinent; several treatises, although themselves lost, are quoted and discussed in other surviving manuscripts. Taken collectively, the series of texts represents, whether explicitly or implicitly, a relatively coherent and consistent body of cosmological discourse relating directly or indirectly to music – especially ritual music and what may be retrospectively understood as art music, that is, that sustained by elite patronage and grounded in theory explicitly articulated in the *shâstras*. What is less clear, as suggested below, is the impact of these esoteric notions on musical form and the layperson's apprehension of it.

A recurrent notion in texts such as the BD and SR is that musical sound is quintessentially vocal rather than instrumental (in contrast to Greek acoustic conceptions), and proceeds along a spiritual pathway from an unmanifested ideal form, through the navel, heart, throat, and finally the mouth. Vocal music, generated by vital breath and thus linked to cosmic energy, was conceived as a sublime manifestation of *nâda-brahma*, a sort of primordial and divinely animating substratum of cosmic sound. In this esoteric view influenced by Tantric and Yogic notions, musical utterance at once worships the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, recapitulates the act of cosmological creation, and acquires value less as an instance of human innovation or mundane expression than as the audible revelation of a deeper stratum of sublime, imperceptible reality. Such a cosmology cohered with a general social and philosophical conservatism which revered Sanskrit tradition and, in the realm of music and aesthetic theory, perpetually sought to reconcile contemporary practice with the supposedly timeless



truths presented in ancient texts, especially the NS. (In contrast to Chinese and Japanese aesthetics, little literary interest was taken in hypothesizing relations between music and ethics, numerology, acoustics, or natural beauty.)

Much discourse in the *shâstras* regarding music and its broader associations took the standard Sanskritic form of elaborate – and some would say, obsessive – taxonomies and enumerations. Some of these, such as the classifications of phonetics and musical instruments, were rigorously empirical and logical; others would strike the modern (and especially Western) reader as fanciful and gratuitous rhetorical exercises bearing little relation to any form of reality outside the texts themselves. For example, the *Nâradishikshâ* related each of the seven notes of the scale to a color, social caste, animal sound, deity, and so on. Such extra-musical associations could be regarded as aspects of music aesthetics in the sense of representing a music ideology relating formal features (in this case, notes) to other natural phenomena and belief systems (see, for example, Rowell 1992: 330). A contrasting point of view would hold that considerations of *nâda-brahma*, ritual roots of chironomy, and Tantric speculations constitute arcane esoterica cultivated in an essentially autonomous Sanskritic literary tradition which had little bearing on the meaning art music had for either its performers or listeners (most of whom, in North India from the twelfth century, were likely in any case to be Muslims unfamiliar with Sanskrit and its literature). Hence, for example, North Indian classical music has long been greatly enjoyed by diverse listeners, both Indian and non-Indian, Hindu and non-Hindu, who have been unfamiliar with and uninterested in Hindu cosmology (see, for example, Clayton 2000: 18).

Similarly contrasting perspectives could be obtained regarding the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tradition of *râga-mâla* painting, in which a given *râga* or melodic mode is portrayed as personified by a standardized set of icons (see Ebeling 1973; Powers 1980). Such paintings might also be accompanied by short, evocative *râga-dhyâna* (*râga*-contemplation) verses, which were also included alongside the more technical *râga* descriptions in some music treatises. Thus, for example, *Todi râga* is generally portrayed as a damsel playing a *vîna* zither, attended by one or more enchanted deer, with an inscribed *dhyâna* depicting her charming appearance and the dulcet tones of *Todi* that she plays. One could argue (as does Gangoly 1989) that such paintings and poems constitute parts of a coherent musical synaesthetic, and they are indeed reflective of the way in which the individual *râgas* have distinct characters and lend themselves to extra-musical associations. Alternatively, such paintings and verses could be regarded as thoroughly autonomous visual-art and literary traditions, having very little to do with music or even “thought about music.”

### *Classical aesthetic theory*

More explicitly relevant to music is the tradition of Sanskritic aesthetic theory, especially that concerned with *rasa* (colloquially pronounced *ras*, rhyming with



“bus”). The first surviving exposition of *rasa* theory is in the *Nâtyashâstra*, the dramaturgical treatise attributed to the sage Bharata, though evidently a compilation of earlier works. As schematically presented in the NS and elaborated in subsequent works, *rasa* (literally “flavor,” “juice,” “essence”) can denote both the sentiment expressed by an art and the viewer’s experience of that emotion. A companion term is *bhâva*, which, depending on context and interpretation, denotes either real-life emotions or the manner of expressing them in art. The NS’s sixth chapter succinctly enumerates the eight *rasas*, namely, *sringâra* (the erotic), *hasya* (the humorous), *karuna* (the sorrowful), *raudra* (the angry), *vira* (the heroic), *bhayânaka* (the frightful), *vibhatsa* (the odious), and *adbhuta* (the wonderful). These are to be regarded as aesthetic counterparts to eight basic real-life emotions (*sthâyi-bhâvas*). Chapter 29 specifies associations of the particular *rasas* with melodic modes (*jâtis*, the precursors to *râgas*) and, less plausibly, with individual notes of the scale.

The Sanskrit drama discussed in the NS, like such still-extant genres as Keralan *kathakali* and *kuttiyâtam* dance-drama, employed highly stylized rather than naturalistic portrayals of characters. *Dramatis personae* consisted of stock stereotypes (*nâyikâs*, e.g. *vipralabdha nâyikâ*, the woman berating but secretly desiring her wayward lover), whose portrayal relied on standardized *bhâvas* encompassing gait, garb, facial expression, and the like, and who were accompanied by music expected to cohere with and enhance the appropriate *rasa*. While the NS’s enumerations of *rasas* might strike a modern reader as artificial, they may have been quite apt as descriptive and prescriptive references to such a stylized theater tradition. As Sanskrit drama eventually died out, the art music discussed in texts became autonomous, and documented interest in *rasa* theory surfaced only irregularly until Abhinavagupta’s impressive *Abhinâvabharati*. The AB elaborates *rasa* aesthetics, stressing the importance of a disinterested attitude on the part of the viewer, and contrasting aesthetic experience with everyday emotions. Although aspects of *rasa* theory are seen by this time as better applied to drama, poetry, visual arts, and dance than to art music, music treatises such as the thirteenth-century SR reflect the AB’s influence and reiterate associations of *rasas* with songs and *râgas*.

As Katz (1996: 416) and others have pointed out, the ultimate merit of *rasa* theory may lie less in its taxonomies and enumerations of emotion-types than in its presentation (however contested and ambiguous at times) of a theory of artistic poetics and reception. As an empirical attempt to rationally explain artistic (including musical) enjoyment and evaluation, *rasa* theory bears striking compatibilities with the orientation of modern Western aesthetic scholarship (as well as corresponding contrasts with, for example, Japanese and Chinese aesthetics). Indeed, further parallels could be noted, including the emphasis on disinterested perception, the distinction (still debated in the West) between aesthetic and real-life experienced emotions, and the idea that however nuanced and diverse expressive forms may be, the goal of artistic contemplation is a generalized aesthetic



pleasure (thereby resolving, for its purposes, the ongoing “negative emotion” debate in Western music aesthetics).

### *From the Muslim period to the present*

From around the thirteenth century, most of North India – and at times, much of the South as well – was ruled by Muslim dynasts. With a few exceptions, from the early fifteenth century Muslim rulers and nobles were ardent patrons of the classical music system they inherited, and in the North, Muslim musicians (including many low-caste Hindu converts and their descendants) dominated the performance scene. A few Muslim rulers took an eclectic interest in Sanskritic learning and commissioned translations of treatises (including texts on music) into Persian. However, beyond a superficial familiarity with the basics of *rasa* theory, it may be said that Muslim patrons and performers had little engagement with Sanskritic aesthetic theory. Meanwhile, although Arab theorists such as the tenth-century al-Fārābī had written on music aesthetics, it cannot be said that the Indo-Muslim rulers introduced a dramatically distinctive or explicitly elaborated theory of music aesthetics. Between the socio-religious extremes of fundamentalists who scorned music and Chishti Sufis who embraced it as a form of devotion and a route to mystical ecstasy, most Muslim patrons apprehended it as one of the fine arts (*funûn-e-latifah*), made all the more worldly by its lack of institutional Islamic support (unlike music in Hindu culture).

The primary effect of Muslim rule on North Indian classical music was to intensify its secular character at the expense of its associations with Hindu cosmology. In the twentieth century, many Hindu writers on music denounced the Muslim patrons for depriving music of its (Hindu) spiritual associations and grounding it not in the temple but in the hedonistic world of the court and courtesan’s salon. Yet it could be counter-argued that in secularizing Hindustani music, Muslim patrons helped make it compatible with modernity and confrontation with the West, thereby contributing to what must be regarded as its formidable vitality at present. For its part, South Indian music enjoys its own prodigious dynamism and bourgeois popular support, while retaining a more overt devotional Hindu dimension (which the listener, however, is free to ignore).

Meanwhile, if classical Sanskritic philosophy has long since ceded prominence to cosmopolitan Western-influenced scholarship, *rasa* theory retains a certain attenuated presence in musical thought. At the very least, aesthetic terms dating back to the NS provide a familiar colloquial descriptive vocabulary, e.g. “*Râg Khamâj* is well suited to *sringâr ras*,” “Abdul Karim Khan’s voice drips with *karun ras*,” or, among cognoscenti, “This song portrays a *vipralabdha nâyikâ*.” While a mechanistic identification of *rasas* with *râgas* is no longer seen as plausible, such past conventions, along with *râgamâla* paintings, are recognized as expressions of the ways in which *râgas* possess distinctive individual expressive characters.



Despite the past cosmological dimensions of Indian art music and whatever lingering presence they may have, both North and South Indian classical musics have become essentially secular fine arts. Performed in concert halls, reviewed in newspapers, and increasingly learned in conservatories, Indian art musics are enjoyed in much the same way as Western concert music, evaluated with many of the same criteria, and amenable to being discussed in the terms of Western academic writing on music aesthetics.

## China

### *Music and ritual*

As an indispensable component of rituals and ceremonies deemed essential to the very survival of the state, music has long been an object of philosophical reflection in China. The philosophy of music outlined by two Confucian philosophers active in the third century BCE, Hsün Tzu and his student Han Fei Tzu, formed the basis of such later works as the *Record of Music* (one section of the *Record of Rites*) and the chapter on music in Ssuma Ch'ien's *Records of the Historian*.

In the classic formulation of the *Record of Music*, "to unite the emotions and to polish external appearances – these are the affairs of Ritual and Music. . . . Music comes out from within; Ritual comes into being from without" (Cook 1995: 42–3). Through a reciprocal process joining inner feeling to outward manifestation, ceremonial performance of properly regulated music upholds the social order and fulfills a vital obligation to ancestors. When music transgresses its proper limits, the Confucian ideal of harmonious relations within the family and the state is seen as seriously threatened. Hence the state must ensure that a correct standard of pitch is maintained as bronze bells or stone chimes are constructed for use in imperial rites.

The rationales offered by ruling elites in support of state ceremonies are inevitably subjected to critique. Mo Tzu, writing perhaps toward the end of the fifth century BCE, argued that "making music is wrong!" inasmuch as the high cost of manufacturing musical instruments and ceremonial costumes induces rulers and ministers to exploit the general population (Mo Tzu 1963). Complaints that Confucian ritual music was boring, like that attributed to Duke Wen of Wei in the *Record of Music*, may have been more common than critiques of exploitation. Of the many varieties of ritual music cultivated in China up to the present, only a select few have been constrained by Confucian standards.

### *Silence, sound, and music*

A conception of sound as "a manifestation of Nature in equilibrium and disequilibrium" (Needham 1962: 131) is compatible both with the Confucian assumption that poorly regulated music is symptomatic of social disorder and with a